Disunited Kingdoms: Peoples and Politics in the British Isles: 1280-1460

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Michael Brown's latest book, *Disunited Kingdoms: Peoples and Politics in the British Isles: 1280–1460*, examines the socio-political development of Britain and Ireland during the late medieval era. The 1280–1460 time-frame encompasses the later reign of Alexander III (1241–86), and the series of wars against Wales (1) and Scotland (2) conducted by Edward I (1239-1307) extending to the end of the reign of James II (1430–60). Particular focus is placed upon the diplomatic affairs and border conflicts between England and Scotland, placing Wales and Ireland into the picture. The military aspects of these wars are considered in tandem with their political ramifications and cultural impact. This time-frame has been selected as due to its transitional nature it constitutes a crucial period in the history of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. According to the author, until the latter part of the 13th century the aforementioned regions and nations were united under the rule of the English King, Edward I, who reigned from 1272 until his death in 1307. However, the prospect of a unified kingdom did not materialise as a consequence of various elements which emerged during the early 14th century and which were intensely felt during the 15th century throughout the British Isles. Michael Brown provides a critical analysis of this escalating crisis, examining the complex conjunction of factors contributing to further divisions within Britain and Ireland as well as to the formation of distinct cultures and national identities, and astutely addressing key issues regarding not only the nature of kingship and unity, but also border strife and civil discord. Such co-existing yet contrasting phenomena of unities and disunities are further examined within a (continental) European framework, particularly with regard to the Hundred Years War.

The author uses four charts (detailing the sovereigns of England (1272–1461), Scotland (1292–1460), aristocratic inheritances in the 14th century, and an outline of the Clan Donald Lords of the Isles) to provide further insight into the intricately intertwining events in Britain. Moreover, eight helpful maps provided prior to the chapter development. The author adopts a chronological approach and this is maintained via the effective use of a thematic sub-structure underlining key issues of sovereignty, national identity and anxiety, as well as the formation and shifting of aristocratic societies between 1280 and 1460. In the introductory chapter and chapter one proper, the notions of 'warlords and sovereign lords' (pp. 1–9) are elucidated with regard to their nuanced linguistic meanings as well as their political context. The author studies how Edward I, via the use of primary source material, was perceived either as a unifier of nations or a breeder of malcontent (pp. 10–33). Aspects of unity and kingship are defined, via the commemoration of Edward I by English texts, in terms of firm legislation, effective administration, and military prowess. Brown develops an interesting point stating that Edward I epitomised piety, fidelity to Christian unity, and reason in matters of sound governance, as commemorated by English chroniclers.(3) Whilst emphasis is placed on the English perception of Edward I, it would have been interesting to juxtapose this with Scottish, Welsh, and Irish perspectives as well, so as to offer a comparative approach to the controversial character of Edward I. 14th- and 15th-century Scottish chronicles, in particular Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon*, provide an extensive series of *exempla* and opprobrium against Edward I; Bower compares the King to a tyrant whose fidelity to the pan-Christian crusade cause was a cover for hypocrisy and the embezzlement of crusade proceeds (*Terre Sancte Subsidium*) instead of his (self-)professed fidelity to *deus vult*.(4)

In chapter two, on Robert Bruce (1274–1329), Brown describes the residual influence of traditional values of kingship and lordship which permeated the era from the late 13th to 15th centuries. He argues that, during the 1270s, the lands in Britain and Ireland neither constituted nor resembled a military realm; the power of the English sovereigns, in particular, was a product of ideological claims to empire and sovereignty.(5) This aspect is further explored via the comparative analysis of governance and diplomatic tactics deployed by Edward I and his contemporaries in the 1280s, Alexander III and Llewelyn ap Gruffydd. Brown then proceeds, maintaining the chronological approach, to delineate the lineage of the Bruces of Annandale, culminating in the military conflicts of the 1306–28 Wars of the Bruces. The latter are used as a springboard to develop his analysis of the Franco-Scottish alliances in the context of Anglo-French and Anglo-Scottish tensions during the 14th century.

Chapter three, entitled 'Sovereignty and war' is one of the most intriguing sections of this book, drawing upon the concept, logistics and ramifications of the term *imperium* (p. 59). In it, Brown provides an interesting explanation of the Gough Map (6), whose purpose, irrespective of its sophisticated visual and

geographical representation, was 'ideological rather than navigational' (p. 55). The Gough Map presents the British Isles as a single entity without setting geopolitical boundaries which would signify individual nation-states or cultural divisions. The paradox with this map is that while it provides a detailed geographical representation of southern England and Wales, this detail lessens with regard to the north and especially Scotland, the latter depicted as mere woodland. Brown presents a convincing case that the fully defined southern part represents Welsh subordination to the English, whereas the uncharted territory of Scotland signifies *terra incognita* as well as an unharnessed wilderness beyond any conqueror's reach (p. 55). Apart from cartography, the English sovereigns used historical narratives and advisory literature in order to confirm their imperial position in the British Isles. Brutus the Trojan and the Arthurian legend are the most renowned examples of such rhetoric. This chapter details further the rhetorical mechanisms deployed by Scots and English alike during the 1301–c.1306 Anglo-Scottish Pleadings at the Curia. Using literature and lore, chronicles (7), canon law, and legal (secular) documents, both Scots and English were intent on promoting their own case as convincingly as possible to the pope, asserting their own rightful place and, above all, distinct national identity on the geopolitical map.(8)

In chapters four to ten, the author takes a thematic as well as chronological approach to address and delve further into the aforementioned key issues surrounding kingship and sovereignty, as well as nationalism, political upheaval and rebellion. Nonetheless, Brown refrains from resorting to mainstream and often gross misinterpretations of *propagandist* language. Instead, he explores the depths of activity and the flexible use of imperial rhetoric in matters of state, in particular, legislation, governance, and diplomacy. These conceptual models are used to analyse the legacy of Edward I's expansionist policies and imperial language during the subsequent reigns of Edward II (1284–1327) and Edward III (1312–77). In chapter four, Brown concentrates on Edward III's Statute of Treason from 1352, which sought to calm the political turbulence which had been a feature of the reigns of his predecessors, as well as to dampen any rebellious spirits against the (English) king (pp. 88–9). The author makes an astute point, interpreting this statute as a means to subdue any form of rebellion, even on a grand-national scale, by officially declaring it illegal and constituting an act of high treason. Indeed, this statute legitimises and endorses state-enforced violence against all forms of political insurrection and military insurgence threatening the English crown (pp. 88–9). In chapter five, Brown brings forth an intriguing document, *The Irish Remonstrance*, which was a letter sent to the pope in 1317 on behalf of Ireland as a state as well as a nation-community. This analysis becomes even more compelling when this letter is juxtaposed with and compared to the 1320 *Declaration of Arbroath*. However, Brown clearly specifies that comparisons between these two documents should be made cautiously, irrespective of certain *attractive* similarities which could, nonetheless, lead to erroneous and inconclusive parallels (pp. 108–11). Nevertheless, the common denominator between them is the opprobrium which they display against the English crown for its military aggression as well as political transgressions against their nations. Irrespective of the attempts of the English crown to establish and maintain a single undisputed English entity, these two documents constitute indisputable testimony that neither the Irish nor the Scots conformed to this imperial norm.(9)

Brown resumes with the analysis, if not deconstruction, of the papal bull *cum Universi* ((10) in chapter six, focusing on the impact of ecclesiastical and aristocratic authorities within the British Isles. Again, a chronological approach is maintained in this chapter, the epicentre being the analysis of Plantagenet rule (c.1324–c.1381). The author shows convincingly the influence of the upper echelons of British and Irish society upon the socio-political affairs within and amongst these regions. In particular, the influence of the clergy as well as regional magnate powers contributed to the formation and subsequent proliferation of nationalist, anti-(English) imperial propaganda. Brown moves into further detail referring to the 1306 case of two episcopal supporters of Robert Bruce being accused of equating the Scottish Wars of Independence to the pan-Christian global crusade against Islam. From 1306 until 1324, a series of monitions and motions of censure had been issued against the Scottish prelates, in particular, the administrator and bishop of St Andrews, William Lamberton for (allegedly) having preached such blasphemy against the Church and Holy Cause.(11)

Chapter seven moves within a more regional context. The author contends that intricate regional and private

jurisdictions crucially affected matters of kingship and governance, and the establishment of civic unity. In particular, Brown refers to the borderlands between England and the Anglicised societies, as well as those of the Gaelic-speaking communities. Brown draws attention to the limitations of the terms *regional*, *marginal*, and *peripheral*; he contests that these terms ought to be dispensed with when examining border interactions and conflicts in order to avoid over-simplifications and, above all, misinterpretations (p. 165). Using the Hebrides, the border shires of England and Scotland, and the western parts of Munster as characteristic examples, the author argues that such mainstream approaches and generic labelling have no place in the in-depth study of these communities individually and as a whole. According to Brown, these areas were not *remote* since they had been dynamic contributors to the centres of legitimate and administrative powers within Britain and Ireland. Arguably, this chapter is one of the most distinct in the book, as it places emphasis upon an often ignored or under-researched aspect of historiography concerning the dynamics of aristocratic powers within smaller communities and social groups. Particular focus is placed upon the Douglases and Percies in this chapter.(12)

The epicentre of chapter eight is the Hundred Years War. Apart from regional conflicts and border strife, Brown provides further insights regarding the co-existing and intertwining phenomena of concord and discord within a European framework. The implications of the *Auld Alliance* (1295–1560) in Anglo-French-Scottish affairs emerge at the forefront. In the last two chapters of the book, nine and ten, the author attempts to connect the three main aspects of his overall analysis: the region, the border, and foreign (continental European) relations as they affected the political evolution of the British Isles. He brings together the British, Irish and European perceptions of British sovereignty, characteristically drawing upon the way Philippe de Mezieres addressed Richard II in his diplomatic correspondence in 1395; the king is addressed as the *King of Great Britain, Prince of Wales and North Wales, Lord of Great Ireland and King of Cornwall*.(13) Brown expounds upon the widespread European idea of the English monarch as supreme ruler of the entire British Isles, despite this clearly not always being the case, especially during the 14th and 15th centuries.

Brown also compares and contrasts the government of Edward III with that of Richard II and appraises the achievements as well as failures of Scottish and English sovereigns alike during the late 14th and early 15th centuries, namely Richard II, David II, Robert III, Henry IV, and Henry V. Indeed, it took a rare breed of a sovereign to manage and maintain the balancing act of socio-political equilibrium, and the aforementioned kings were seldom able to do this. Brown concludes with a brief analysis regarding the repercussions of the War of the Roses (1455–87) as well as the regicide of James I (21 February 1437), examining the detrimental effects of civil discord and political upheaval on England and Scotland.(14) In the final section of this book, the author refers to Walter Bower's views on the Scottish civil discord which led to James I's assassination. This regicide had a profound effect on Bower as it signified treason against the king and, above all, the welfare of the state.(15)

Michael Brown ends this most thought-provoking book by providing further issues to probe and ponder concerning late medieval and early modern British and Irish history. Briefly referring to the rise of Henry VIII as well as the emergence of the Protestant Reformation, Brown implies that the political unities and disunities he has detailed endured and worsened, especially during the Reformation, in England and Scotland alike. Although intended for undergraduate students, as stated on the back-cover, this book will have far wider appeal. It is a wide-ranging text drawing together a wealth of primary and secondary sources, albeit heavily reliant on published rather than unpublished texts, deriving from the Continent, Britain, and Ireland. Using chronicles, state documents, parliamentary records, and diplomatic correspondence, Brown provides a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the volatile and often turbulent nature of sovereignty. Despite dealing with mutable and intricate concepts, the author ingeniously elucidates the developing ideas of national identity and sense of community via a nuanced political and linguistic perspective. *Disunited Kingdoms* is a significant addition to the promising historiography encompassing late medieval and early modern European, British and Irish socio-political affairs.

Notes

1. See further on Edward I's conquest of Wales (1274–84): M. Prestwich, *Edward I* (Berkeley, CA, 1988), pp. 170–201.Back to (1)
2. See with regard to the *Great Cause* and the Scottish Revolt (1286–97), Prestwich, *Edward I*, pp. 356–75; and regarding the Scottish Wars (1296–1307), ibid, pp. 469–516.Back to (2)
3. See further concerning the concepts of *pax Dei* and *pax et unitas* concerning the role of the sovereign within the battlefield and within one's own realm: T. Mastnak, *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order* (Berkeley, CA, 2002), pp. 1–9, 27, 34–7, 93–6.Back to (3)
4. The demonization of Edward I in late medieval Scottish historical narratives was first found in the chronicle formerly attributed to John of Fordun: *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, eds F. Skene and W. Skene (2 vols, Lampeter, 1993), ii, 300-301; source interpolated and expanded in *Scotichronicon*; Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon: Volumes I-IX, Books I-XVI*, ed. D. E. R. Watt (Aberdeen and Edinburgh, 1987–98), v, pp. 415–17. Castigations against theEdward I are ubiquitous throughout both chronicles as well as subsequent 15th- and 16th-century Scottish historical literature.Back to (4)
5. See E. L. G. Stones and G. G. Simpson, *Edward I and the Throne of Scotland: 1290–1296: An Edition of the Record Sources for the Great Cause* (Oxford, 1978), i, pp. 137–62, 222–4. Moreover, Tyerman stresses the importance of the crusade loyalty of sovereigns in late medieval and early modern England in maintaining sound diplomatic relations with the Roman Catholic Church; see C. Tyerman, *England and the Crusades: 1095–1588*, (Chicago, IL, 1988), pp. 329–30. Prestwich provides an in-depth analysis of the significance crusade diplomacy as well as military involvement had in Edward I's relations with Rome and the Continent: Prestwich, *Edward I*, pp. 66–86, 312–36.Back to (5)
6. The Gough Map is estimated to have been produced around 1360, reliant on an earlier model produced during the reign of Edward I; R. A. Pelham, 'The Gough Map', *The Geographical Journal*, 81 (1933), 34–9.Back to (6)
7. See C. Given-Wilson, *The Writing of History in Medieval England* (London, 2004), pp. 65–9.Back to (7)
8. The following newly published article provides perceptive insight into the political and legal implications of the 1301–06 Anglo-Scottish Pleadings at the Curia culminating with the 1320 *Decalaration of Arbroath*: S. Tebbit, 'Papal pronouncements on legitimate lordship and the formulation of nationhood in early fourteenth-century Scottish writings', *Journal of Medieval History*, 40 (2014), 44–62.Back to (8)
9. See further concerning the socio-political ramification of the *Declaration of Arbroath*: G. G. Simpson, 'The Declaration of Arbroath revitalised', *Scottish Historical Review*, 56 (1977), 11–33; E. Stones, 'Appeal to history in Anglo-Scottish relations between 1291 and 1401', *Archives*, 9 (1969), 11–21, 80–3.Back to (9)
10. Brown provides extensive analysis of *cum Universi*, issued in 1192, in his book: *The Wars of Scotland: 1214–1371* (Edinburgh, 2004), pp. 123–7, 192.Back to (10)
11. See further with regards to this case: *Chronicle of Lanercost, 1272–1346*, ed. and trans. H. Maxwell (Glasgow, 1913), pp. 165–6; *Documents and Records Illustrating the History of Scotland*, ed. F. Palgrave (London, 1837), pp. 330, 347–48; A. MacQuarrie, *Scotland and the Crusades: 1095–1560* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 71; 'The idea of the Holy War in Scotland, 1296–1330', *Innes Review*, 32 (1981), 83–92.Back to (11)
12. See further on the Douglases: M. Brown: '"Rejoice to Hear of Douglas": The House of Douglas and the presentation of magnate power in late medieval Scotland', *Scottish Historical Review*, 76 (1997), 161–84.Back to (12)
13. Brown refers to the following source: *Philippe de Mezieres' Letter to Richard II: A Plea Made in 1395 for Peace between England and France*, ed. G.W. Coopland (Liverpool, 1975), p. 101.Back to (13)
14. See further concerning English as well as Scottish perceptions of the assassination of James I: *Death and Dissent: Two Fifteenth-Century Chronicles*, ed. L.M. Matheson (Woodbridge, 1999).Back to (14)
15. See regarding Bower's analysis of this regicide: M. Brown, '"Vile Times": Walter Bower's last book and the minority of James II', *The Scottish Historical Review*, 79 (2000), 165–88.Back to (15)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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